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ABSTRACT

This paper contains handouts and materials for use in a college level nonfiction television writing course. Following a description of the course and its assignments and texts, the major portion of the paper contains samples of various script formats, including a news commentary, a commercial advertisement, a documentary, and public and community relations announcements.
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AN APPROACH TO TEACHING TELEVISION WRITING

It is difficult to present a highly detailed syllabus for the course I teach in non-fiction television writing. So much of the content of the course is provided by student writing, the discussions generated by the writing, and the evolution of student creativity and craftsmanship. Included here as a substitute, therefore, is a small collection of handouts, commercials, film reviews, and television formats to give an indication of the general shape and direction of the course. Additionally, I've included several examples of student work.

PURPOSE OF COURSE

This course acquaints the student with the aesthetic principles and practical skills involved in non-fiction television writing. This course does not delve into the world of popular network programming. The student is urged to view media messages--PSAs, commercials, documentaries--from the viewpoint of a structural analyst. Interest should be focused on how the video message is constructed. The student should develop an acute sense of spatial proportion, and a keen understanding of the dynamics of sound and image integration.

Assignments in this course are written as if scheduled for network or local distribution. All standards of good taste apply. Let me stress that this is not a production course. Students are encouraged, of course, to seek opportunities to turn their scripts into actual documentaries. The emphasis, however, is on the writing of scripts.

ASSIGNMENTS

Two scripts, each between 12-15 minutes in length, constitute the major obligation in the course. The first is called a "process" script. The second is an investigative script dealing with a social issue pertinent to the campus or to the community. Process scripts are written around structured activities or sequential procedures, events which contain their own natural progression. Examples of topics which lend themselves to process documentaries are pottery making, a day at a radio station, homecoming week, directing a play, and so on. On occasion I have assigned class members to write a script promoting the University to various

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target audiences. One script would be shaped for potential benefactors, another would be tailored to underadvantaged youth. In all cases, the assignment remains essentially an exercise in organization, narrative continuity, and shot selection.

The investigative script usually embraces a controversial subject, forcing the student to confront the environment directly. Appointments with city officials and community leaders are made, interviews are conducted. The student cannot take a passive stance toward this assignment. The challenge rests in securing the confidence of interviewees, researching the evidence, and grappling with the ethics of investigative reporting. Topics selected in the past include: Women in ROTC, Student Housing and Slum Landlords, Health Care and the Aged, The Sports Machine and Academic Freedom, Police Protection and the Rape Victim, Being Gay in the South, and Angel Dust in the Classroom.

In both instances, the student submits three possible topics. Included are a tentative title, an extended purpose statement, a listing of prospective locations, and the names of people who have agreed to provide commentaries. I then make the selection based on the problems and challenges inherent in the topic, and the variety that the topic will bring to our class discussions.

In addition to these major scripts, shorter class exercises (PSAs, commercials, step outlines, storyboards) are introduced into the course as needed. These exercises treat on a smaller scale the same problems of proportion, balance, emphasis and detail that the student will face on the longer scripts. Also, to encourage the analytical spirit when watching documentaries, the student is required to write short reviews of television or film documentaries. Undergraduates write two, while graduates write three. Reviews of books related to television writing, producing or programming are also required. Undergraduates write one review. Graduates write two. Each review runs between 350-500 words. Grades are determined by the quality of class discussion, the excellence of the scripts and other writing assignments, and by the degree of personal improvement shown throughout the class.

TEXTS

I have found Writing for Television and Radio (3rd ed. Hastings House) by Robert Hilliard to be very useful. Other texts which merit consideration include Alfred Brenner's The TV Scriptwriter's Handbook (Writer's Digest Books), Richard A. Blum's Television Writing: From Concept to Contract (Hastings House), and Edgar E. Willis and Camille D'Arienzo's Writing Scripts for Television, Radio, and Film (Holt, Rinehart and Winston).

SUPPLEMENTARY COMMENTS

More than anything, this course is designed to aid students in "seeing" their world in a new and stimulating fashion. It is a

course in shaping time and space to the specific needs of the communication message. To aid them in comprehending the need for precision and detail, I require that each shot of their scripts be timed and sufficiently described to provide a clear understanding of what the image "says." All words in the dialogue/narrative column must be included also. In short, their scripts represent a verbatim chronicle of the proposed film, as if they had viewed the finished product and had annotated every image and word.

Several documentary films are also screened in class. Films such as The River, Symphony of a City, Harvest of Shame, Night and Fog, and Prelude to War serve to orient the student to "see" the juxtaposition of sound and image, and scrutinize the editing process.

The shorter exercises--PSAs and commercials--allow the student to experiment with time and space in 30 and 60 second segments. Topics range from selling toothpaste and waterbeds, to enticing tourists to vacation in the Ozarks or soliciting contributions to the United Negro College Fund. At times, I have also sent the students over to the Student Union for the purpose of writing a 2:00 script for a film which would promote the union's services and be shown to incoming freshmen during Orientation Day.

The storyboard assignment allows me to see what they mean by Long Shot (LS), Medium Shot (MS) and Close Up (CU). I usually ask that two minutes from their process script be put onto 8½ x 11 sheets of paper. These are then taped to the walls, in sequence, and the student walks us down the set of images while explaining how long a specific pan shot will be or what the narrator will say as the camera dollies down a tree lined path. These rough sketches amount to nothing more than visual aids. Their usefulness, however, lies in their ability to sharpen a student's compositional powers and develop an appreciation for visual variety.

The Step Outline encourages the student to anticipate the major sequences and estimate their running time. Also, it helps keep the student focused on his research. Often a student becomes the victim of his research and won't see any workable pattern to his investigation. Although a script may deviate from the step outline, a majority of scripts remain 80% faithful to the original sequencing.

SAMPLE HANDOUT

REF: TIMING SHOTS AND SCRIPT FORMAT

On the following written assignments I will ask you to time each of your shots. This will force you to "see" a shot and gauge the amount of time it needs to be on the screen. If we are shooting a bike race, for example, is it better to write in a trucking shot to run parallel with the biker, or do we want a CU of his helmeted face (2 sec.) and then a shot of his legs pumping the pedals (3 sec.), then a FS of him riding directly at us (4 sec.) and so on. Begin to time out shots so you can give the information you need, and arrange it in an interesting manner. If the music is languid and melodic, then maybe the first trucking shot is better because it is in the same tone and mood of the music. If you are working with a fast paced, percussion piece, then perhaps quick cuts would fit best. Also, as you select your shots, you have to consider the background, the colors, the time of day or night, and a host of other considerations. I'd suggest you begin to see things through an artificial "viewfinder." Hold your hand as if you were holding a pea shooter. Then look through it. Now you see only what the tunnel allows you to see. You have cut down your peripheral vision. Or walk around with your hands open and in front of you with the tips of your thumbs touching each other. This will make a "U" shape similar to a viewfinder in a camera. It is amazing what you "see" when your vision is restricted.

The format for television is simple. Video on the left and Audio on the right. Time is shown in this fashion.

VIDEO

AUDIO

0:04	CU OF PRESIDENT CARTER AS HE TAKES OATH OF OFFICE	ANNCR: (VO) The ritual is a simple one. The left hand is placed upon a Bible, and the right hand is raised.
0:12	DOLLY BACK TO MLS OF INAUGURAL STAND SHOWING FAMILY AND DIGNITARIES	A series of words are exchanged, and in a matter of moments
0:14	MS OF CARTER IN PEANUT FIELD	a common man
0:16	LS OF CARTER AT SUNSET SITTING BY POND	a solitary man
0:19	MS OF CARTER WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS AT OUTDOOR PICNIC	a man like most men
0:21	CU OF CARTER FINISHING THE OATH. SERIOUS LOOK ON HIS FACE.	becomes the leader of the Free Western World.
0:23	CU OF CARTER AS HE SAYS	CARTER: So help me God.

In this fashion I can tell how long each shot is, and am still able to know the running time (the amount of time which has passed) at the end of the segment. You must estimate the time it will take to read the narration and then decide the number and duration of the shots you want to use. Or, work from image to narration. Don't be terribly concerned about the form. Just keep in mind that your purpose is to be as clear as possible. If you have to take a few lines to tell what is in the shot, then take those few lines. If you are trying to convey a special shot and can't think of the correct abbreviations, then write out your description.

STUDENT
COMMERCIAL EXAMPLE

Video

Audio

0:03	MLS OF YOUNG WOMAN IN HER '30's IN NEAT, CRISP HIKING CLOTHES, SITTING ON TOP STEP OF PORCH. MAN SEEN ON PORCH BEHIND AND TO SIDE OF HER IN RUMPLED OUTDOOR CLOTHES. HE IS LOOKING DOWN AT LARGE PILE OF CAMPING GEAR, CHECKING ITEMS OFF LIST. HE LOOKS FRAZZLED WHILE WOMAN LOOKS CALM.	
0:05	DOLLY TO MCU WOMAN TAKING KNIFE FROM BREAST POCKET	WOMAN: For our camping trip we'll need:
0:08	MCU WOMAN'S HANDS UNFOLDING TWO BLADES FROM KNIFE: MAN SEEN IN BACKGROUND RUMMAGING THROUGH PILE, FINDING TWO LARGE KITCHEN KNIVES, PUTTING THEM IN BACK PACK	sharp knives,
0:10	MCU WOMAN'S HANDS UNFOLDING BOTTLE OPENER FROM KNIFE. MAN PUTS BOTTLE OPENER IN PACK	a bottle opener,
0:12	MCU WOMAN'S HANDS UNFOLDING CORK-SCREW FROM KNIFE, MAN FINDS CORK-SCREW, PUTS IT IN PACK	a corkscrew,
0:14	MCU WOMAN'S HANDS UNFOLDING SMALL SAW IN KNIFE. MAN STUFFS LARGE HAND SAW INTO PACK	a saw,
0:16	MCU WOMAN'S HANDS UNFOLDING SCISSORS FROM KNIFE. MAN PUTS LARGE PAIR OF SCISSORS IN PACK	some scissors,
0:18	MCU WOMAN'S HANDS UNFOLDING KNIFE'S WRENCH. MAN JAMS LARGE PIPE WRENCH INTO BULGING BACKPACK	maybe a wrench,
0:21	MCU WOMAN'S HANDS UNFOLDING FISH SCALER. MAN DESPERATELY SEARCHING THROUGH PILE, CANNOT FIND WHAT HE WANTS	a fish scaler,
0:27	MCU WOMAN'S HANDS PULLING TWEEZERS FROM KNIFE. MAN STILL SEARCHING THROUGH PILE	some tweezers,
0:27	MS SMILING WOMAN PULLING OUT TOOTH-PICK FROM KNIFE, HOLDING IT UP. MAN SITTING WITH HEAD IN HANDS	and a toothpick.
0:30	ECU PICTURE OF KNIFE WITH ALL BLADES AND ATTACHMENTS SHOWING	The Swiss Army knife! A knife for all reasons.

SAMPLE DOCUMENTARY CRITIQUE

Write a 350-500 word double-spaced critique of a documentary. Keep the following questions in mind: what is the purpose of the documentary, what is the problem, what evidence is introduced--testimony, statistics, expert opinion, animated maps, captured film and so on. Then, look for the proportion given to illuminating the problem, assessing possible solutions, advocating one solution over another. Is there a narrator? If there is then what is his function? Does he synthesize important information and provide a synopsis of what has transpired, or does he simply serve as glue to stick segments next to each other? Is music a factor in the film? Does it help or hinder the purpose, reinforce the mood, make an ironic comment on the material (for example, do we hear the music of the Roaring Twenties signifying good times and affluence while we are seeing slum dwellings and poorly treated immigrants crowding into the cities)?

In short, I want you to play critic. I will need to know the title of the documentary, the network, the night and hour it was screened. You will find, if you haven't written any criticism for a while, that you will want to say everything you feel and think about the documentary. Fight against this inclination. You have only a limited space. I'm suggesting you see at least two documentaries because the one that sparks your interest the most will be the easiest to write about. I'm including an example of a highly satisfactory critique written by a University of Arkansas student. Do not feel obligated to copy this format. There are many ways to approach the assignment.

THE CASE OF THE BERMUDA TRIANGLE

In the last few years a series of books and articles have created a large public interest in the Bermuda Triangle. According to these books hundreds of boats and planes have disappeared in the Triangle, and are still disappearing, without logical explanation. Experts are baffled, legend has it, and have begun to look for a supernatural explanation to this mystery that science can't solve.

The Case of the Bermuda Triangle, a 60 minute documentary produced, written, and directed by Graham Massey in 1974, and aired on November 25th as part of the NOVA series on PBS, is a serious investigation of the Triangle that successfully solves the mystery of the area, and consequently demolishes the legend.

The film presents two types of evidence. First, the evidence of the legend. The main source for this is visual, consisting of clips from a pseudodocumentary called The Devil's Triangle, narrated by Vincent Price. The clips give the basic details of a specific disappearance; further details are supplied by quoting books about the Triangle and interviewing the authors of these books.

Once the legend's version has been told the second type of evidence is brought out. This consists of interviews with eyewitnesses, examinations of newspaper reports and official records, and interviews with various authorities. These are the primary sources for research, and the film makes it clear that fabricators of the legend never used these sources. The film presents information that has been left out of the legend, misquoted, or completely distorted. For example, a clip from The Devil's Triangle shows a couple in a sailboat on a beautiful, calm day, as Vincent Price reveals that these people disappeared without a trace. The film then cuts to a researcher who reads a newspaper clipping that mentions the boat was lost during "the worst winter storm of the year." Another clip from The Devil's Triangle quotes the last message sent by a Japanese freighter: "Danger like dagger--come quick." The frame freezes as the narrator points out that the real message was "Very danger--come quick", and the film cuts to a still of a giant waterspout. The narrator adds that eyewitnesses from another ship saw the Japanese vessel sink in a violent storm at sea. The claim made by Charles Berlitz, an authority on the Triangle, that pilots are afraid to fly in the area, is disputed by a federal aviation expert who says that, in the first place, no scheduled commercial flight has ever been lost in the Triangle, and secondly, pilots volunteer to fly routes into the Triangle.

At one point in the film Richard Winer, author of a book about the Triangle, is asked why he tended not to elaborate on the facts of the case. His reply is that he wanted to make his book interesting, that if it was just facts no one would buy it. The documentary refutes this claim, too. The Case of the Bermuda Triangle presents accurate information solidly for one hour, and it is fascinating. By researching thoroughly, choosing material carefully, presenting it in a variety of ways, and working to make it intellectually and visually stimulating, the film maker has produced an entertaining film, and at the same time, a valid investigative documentary.

YOUR FUTURE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

VideoAudio

0:04 LS FROM HIGH IN THE AUDIENCE
STANDS OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION.
SHOT OF GRADUATES ON PLATFORM.

SHOT BEGINS TO ZOOM IN SLOWLY.
AS GRADUATES RISE, MOVE TO PODIUM
AND RECEIVE THEIR DIPLOMAS

0:17 SHOT ZOOMS CLOSER

0:19 SHOT EMPHASIZES THE FACES

0:24 ANOTHER ANGLE, LOOKING DOWN
ROW OF SEATED GRADUATES WITH
ROBERT IN FOREGROUND AND
PRINCIPAL IN BACKGROUND. AS
HIS NAME IS CALLED HE RISES

0:30 SHOT OF ROBERT APPROACHING
PRINCIPAL. THIS SHOT IS TAKEN
FROM THE PRINCIPAL'S P.O.V. SO
ROBERT IS WALKING TOWARD US.
AS DIPLOMA IS GIVEN TO ROBERT
HE SHAKES PRINCIPAL'S HAND

0:33 ROBERT TURNS TO LEAVE THE PLAT-
FORM. HE IS SMILING AND WAVING
TO HIS PARENTS

0:35 MS OF PARENTS SMILING BACK

0:55 ROBERT IS STILL MOVING OFF THE
PLATFORM BUT MIDWAY THE CAMERA
GOES INTO SLOW MOTION. ROBERT
CONTINUES DOWN STAIRS AND ACROSS
THE GREEN GRASS SEPARATING THE
PLATFORM FROM THE SPECTATORS.
BLACK GOWN FLOWS BEHIND IN THE
WIND. HE IS GETTING CLOSER
(TELEPHOTO LENS) UNTIL WE SEE
HIM SMILING INTO THE CAMERA AND
THE SHOT THEN SUPERIMPOSES OVER
A LS OF THE FAYETTEVILLE CAMPUS

MUSIC: POMP AND CIRCUMSTANCE

MUSIC: POMP CONTINUES WITH
NAMES OF STUDENTS HEARD OVER

Jennifer Todd

Michael Tomlinson

Margaret Toller

Robert Stack

PRINCIPAL: Congratulations,
Robert. I wish you success
in the future.

ROBERT: Thank you, sir.

MUSIC: FADES OUT SLOWLY AND
IS OUT COMPLETELY WHEN ANNCR
BEGINS SPEAKING

ANNCR: (VO) You finally made
it. Your high school diploma.
That piece of paper you've worked
so hard for. It's taken three
years of work, good times, bad
times and memories. But what now?
Your career plans require a
quality college education.
Well, you can get that fine
education. Stay right here in
Arkansas, close to home, at
the University of Arkansas at
Fayetteville.

EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICE

	<u>Video</u>	<u>Audio</u>
:05	CU OF AMEULANCE LIGHTS	SIREN HEARD
		VOICE: (VO ON CB RADIO) A 1-12 is reported on Highway 71 North.
:10	ZOOM OUT TO LS CF AMBULANCE COMING OUT OF A HOSPITAL	NATURAL SOUND OF CITY TRAFFIC
:25	MEDIUM TRACKING SHOT OF AMBULANCE DRIVING THROUGH TOWN	NARRATOR: (VO) The Washington Regional Medical Service has 10 ambulances and 30 people on its staff. It currently serves all of Washington County.
:27	CUT TO ARRIVAL OF THE AMBULANCE AT THE SCENE OF AN ACCIDENT	NATURAL SOUND
:29	CUT TO CU OF A MEDIC GETTING OUT OF CAR	
:34	CUT TO MS OF 2 MEDICS RUNNING TO MAN LAYING ON GROUND SURROUNDED BY PEOPLE	
:36	ZOOM TO MCU OF 2 MEDICS BREAKING THROUGH CROWD	
:38	CUT TO CU OF MEDIC OVER THE INJURED VICTIM'S FACE	
:40	XCU OF MEDIC'S HAND CHECKING PULSE OF INJURED MAN	
:42	XCU OF MEDIC'S HANDS PUMPING CHEST OF INJURED MAN	
:43	XCU OF INJURED MAN'S FACE	
:44	XCU OF SQUINTING FACE OF MEDIC	
:46	CU OF INJURED MAN TAKING A BREATH (SHOWING A SIGN OF LIFE)	
:51	MS AS 2 MEDICS PICK UP INJURED MAN ON A STRETCHER WALK TOWARD AMBULANCE (CROWD WATCHING AS THEY MOVE THE INJURED MAN AWAY)	NATURAL SOUND. (POT DOWN)

:55 FREEZE FRAME

NARRATOR: The E.M.S....You don't
realize how much you need them.....

CUT OF MS OF ACCIDENT -
CROWD OF PEOPLE AROUND THE
:59 INJURED BODY

CUT TO A CU OF INJURED MAN'S
FACE CHOKING AND GASPING FOR
1:02 BREATH

CUT TO A CU OF A 40-YEAR OLD
1:04 WOMAN FRANTIC

CUT TO MCU OF BYSTANDER OVER
1:07 DYING INJURED MAN

BYSTANDER: Where's the Ambulance?

ZOOM INTO THE BYSTANDER CU
1:09 FACE FRANTIC AND HELPLESS

1:11 FREEZE FRAME

NARRATOR:.....Till they aren't there.

DOWNTOWN FAYETTEVILLE: REBUILDING THE SQUARE

Video

SERIES OF SHOTS OF BUSY SHOPPERS ON TOWN SQUARE, SHOTS OF CARS, PEOPLE WALKING, CASH REGISTERS, PEOPLE HAVING COKES AT THE JC PENNEY'S FOUNTAIN
0:10

SHOTS OF FAMILIES ON PICNICS ON THE GRASS IN FRONT OF OLD POST OFFICE, OUTDOOR DRAMAS BEING PRESENTED, FIDDLERS ON THE LAWN
0:30

MS OF CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS
0:33

SHOTS OF THE SQUARE, BUT NOW THERE ARE FEWER PEOPLE, THE CHANGE SHOULD NOT BE TOO ABRUPT
0:48

PAN SHOT OF THE SQUARE, KEY ON "SALE" SIGNS, LITTLE TRAFFIC AND FEW PEOPLE
1:02

SHOTS OF MERCHANTS LEANING IN DOORWAYS, QUIETLY SIPPING A CUP OF COFFEE, OF PEOPLE WALKING BY THE STORES, LOOKING IN THE WINDOWS BUT MOVING ON
1:12

MS OF NARRATOR STANDING IN FRONT OF OLD POST OFFICE
1:25

Audio

MUSIC: BLUEGRASS, UP LOUD AT THE START, FADES GRADUALLY

NARRATOR: (VO) The city of Fayetteville is part of one of the fastest growing regions in the United States. Situated in Northwestern Arkansas, the population and per capita income have all increased steadily over the past decade.

All indications suggest that this growth will continue.

The downtown business district, known locally as The Square, has traditionally been the commercial center of the city and for the surrounding communities in Washington County. But while the city and the county have prospered,

the square has declined. Businesses have left the square. Some to relocate. Some have simply gone out of business. More importantly, of course, is that customers have left the square.

NARRATOR: A survey made in 1976, as part of an economic analysis of the downtown area, asked local businessmen what they considered the future to be for the downtown area. Many of the responses were grim.

Video

1:30 SHOT OF MERCHANT AT HIS JOB

1:34 ANOTHER MERCHANT AT WORK

1:37 ANOTHER MERCHANT AT WORK

SHOT OF NARRATOR ON SIDEWALK
1:55 IN FRONT OF OLD POST OFFICE

LS OF MR. PAUL LEWIS APPROACHING
THE DOWNTOWN FAYETTEVILLE
2:03 UNLIMITED BUILDING

CUT TO INSIDE TO SEE SEC-
RETARY GREET HIM. HE GOES ACROSS
2:10 THE ROOM AND HANGS UP HIS COAT

MEDIUM 2 SHOT OF NARRATOR AND
LEWIS CHATTING IN THE SMALL
LOUNGE AREA IN THE DFU BUILDING
2:25 CAMERA FAVORS MR. LEWIS

Audio

MERCHANT: (VO) I don't feel it has much chance of being an important area any longer.

MERCHANT (VO) It would cost a multimillion dollar package. And its not worth it.

MERCHANT: (VO) It definitely looks grim.

NARRATOR: This same study, however, indicated that the city had all the economic potential to support a flourishing downtown business district. The obvious question then is: "Why has the Square deteriorated?"

Mr. Paul Lewis has been an important figure in the business community of Fayetteville since 1910. After retiring in 1963 he helped to organize Downtown Fayetteville Unlimited. He is currently director of this group and is a primary force in combating the erosion of the Square.

MR. LEWIS: You see, many of the buildings on the Square are very old and in dangerous condition. The tenants hadn't maintained them, and neither had the owners, because it was too expensive for them. When Urban Renewal came in 1971 they decided that these buildings had to come down.